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Insight Into Truman Is New

OFF THE RECORD: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman. Edited by Robert H. Ferrell. Harper & Row. \$15.

Reviewed by Jim Collins

"IN THE MIDDLE of the speech, some big voice up in the corner hollered out, 'Give 'em hell, Harry!' Well, I never gave anybody hell — I just told the truth on these fellows and they thought it was hell."

Anyone old enough to remember Harry Truman and his presidency will recognize this colorful quote from the man from Missouri. But the former president's vivid speech is only a small part of "Off The Record," a book based on newly-released and unsent letters Truman wrote from the time he was sworn in as president on April 12, 1945, until his death in 1972.

And a rich collection of material it is, for the reader will encounter not only Truman the president, but the inner and most private feelings of Truman the man and humanitarian as he wrestled with the nation's problems both during and after his term in office.

WITHOUT a doubt, he was one of the few men to hold the presidency who wasn't an egotist. In fact, he had mixed feelings about the job itself, as is evidenced in a memo he wrote to himself in the summer of 1945 after taking office: "Came back to the great white jail and read the papers, some history, and then wrote this... Why in hell does anybody want to be head of state? Damned if I know." Yet, he ran the White House as if it were a general store, referring to those he saw daily, whether tourists or prominent statesmen, as "customers."

If the office itself called for tactful public words and deeds, Truman became an expert at venting his private frustrations and true feelings in his diary entries. An excellent and humorous example is an entry revealing his thoughts concerning "Mister Prima Donna, Brass Hat, Five-Star MacArthur. He's worse

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than the Cabots and Lodges — they at least talked with one another before they told God what to do. Mac tells God right off!"

However, the true humility of the man emerges in a number of his unsent letters, which are powerfully written and emotion-packed. These are the meat of the book and will give the reader a new insight into Truman and the decisions he faced.

A PROFESSOR of history at UCLA, currently working on yet another book on Truman, reveals that when Truman was shown the final manuscript of Merle Miller's "Plain Speaking," written after numerous interviews with him in 1960 and 1961, he threatened to sue Miller if the book was ever published. This may account for why the book didn't appear until 1973, one year after Truman's death. A rereading of Miller's book now reveals a number of discrepancies in what he claims Truman said and the material included in "Off the Record." Perhaps the most blatant difference is Miller's claim that Truman said the CIA was his "biggest mistake," while Truman corrects the editor of Life magazine on this view in a 1964 letter in the Ferrell book.

"Off the Record" is a treasure to read. A timely book, it combines the humor, compassion and thoughtful concern of a man who became known to the nation first as "Mister President" and later as "Mister Citizen." Which is exactly how Harry Truman himself wanted it.

Jim Collins is a Denver writer and reviewer.